

VZCZCXRO9104
PP RUEH DU RUEHGI RUEHJO RUEHMR
DE RUEH KI #1067 1861029
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 051029Z JUL 06
FM AMEMBASSY KINSHASA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4293
INFO RUEHXR/RWANDA COLLECTIVE
RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

UNCLAS KINSHASA 001067

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

E.O.12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CG](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#)
SUBJECT: MEDIA CAMPAIGN IN THE DRC'S ELECTION OFFICIALLY BEGINS

Ref: A) Kinshasa 937, B) Kinshasa 1033

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11. (SBU) Summary: The first, historic televised presidential debate, marking the June 29 opening of the official campaign, was a technical success, and it set an enviably moderate tone. Unfortunately, only two of the expected five candidates participated, and rather obscure ones at that. Elsewhere, the police reportedly did not prevent some campaign banners being torn down by rival candidates in the provinces, because of some confusion about the timing of the start of the official campaign. There will certainly be other such aggressive campaign tactics. Still, the candidates are officially out of the starting blocks, and the DRC's race to democracy has begun. End Summary

Inside the RTNC Studio

12. (U) The first presidential debate was produced by the High Media Authority (HAM), the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and state television (RTNC), and was broadcast live for 90 minutes on the night of June 29. It featured only two candidates, Messrs Mbuyi Alafwele (Rally for a New Society) and Ozee Muyima (Renewal of Development and Democracy). The HAM and IEC presidents, Modeste Mutinga and Abbe Malu Malu, were in the studio audience.

13. (U) According to a lottery organized by the HAM among the 33 presidential candidates, five candidates were to have participated in the first debate (ref A). The no-shows were Vice-President Arthur Zahidi Ngoma and Minister of Research (and former Prime Minister) Kamanda wa Kamanda. The fifth candidate, Roger Lumbala, showed up, but decided not to partake in the televised debate, absent the two more well-known candidates.

14. (U) After the debate, HAM president Mutinga expressed considerable satisfaction that it came off as scheduled. One of the HAM vice-presidents in the studio told PAO immediately after the broadcast that the two contenders had struck the tone he wished all candidates would emulate. In fact, the two, relatively unknown candidates spoke in turn, respected the time limitations set by the moderator, and dutifully tried to be more specific when prodded by the two journalists on the panel. Among the topics discussed were garbage collection and recycling, the need for municipal (in addition to national) police and a republican army, voter education, public health, the economy, the dearth of effective leadership, and protecting the intellectual property rights of Congolese artists and musicians.

15. (U) The following HAM/CEI broadcast debate was on July 2, and, again, only two of five candidates partook. The tone of that debate was also moderate. On July 5, incumbent President Joseph Kabila is scheduled to debate Oscar Kashala and three others.

On the Hustings

¶6. (SBU) Two hours before the June 29 televised debate, Radio Okapi aired a talk show about the campaign. Okapi reported that rival political camps in the provincial capitals of Kindu and Mbuji Mayi, and perhaps elsewhere, spent the day tearing down each others' campaign banners. Invited on the Okapi radio show was the Vice-Minister of the Interior, who said the Congolese police would have prevented such excesses had they known the official campaign was to begin during the day of June 29. He erroneously thought the media campaign officially began at midnight. (Note: The BBC, too, was confused on this point in its television and radio news reports, even though a BBC reporter attended the opening televised debate on the 29th.)

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Despite the confusion on timing, and the lamentable no-shows in the RTNC studio, the June 29 televised presidential debate - perhaps the country's first ever - came off well, at least as seen from inside the studio, which was cause for Modeste Mutinga's understandable elation. Kinshasa is now festooned with campaign banners. If Kindu and Mbuji Mayi are any indication, many will no doubt be torn down by rivals. There will be considerable political agitation in the coming month, possibly underhanded and even violent. But the DRC's democratic experiment has begun in earnest.

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